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CLOSE-UP

JON LORD

PRAISE THE LORD!

WHEN JON LORD was 16 his mother asked him what he wanted to be when he left school. "A conductor," said Jon. His mother went mad. "After all the money we've spent on your musical education, you want to go and work on the buses!" she shouted.

Eleven years later Malcolm Arnold appeared on TV, ostensibly to be interviewed about his recently awarded MBE. Instead he preferred to talk about Deep Purple and their concert he had conducted. "Jon Lord," he said, "is a better musician than I am."

Jon Lord is 28 years old and formed Deep Purple with lead guitar Ritchie Blackmore, just over two years ago. Their biggest claim to fame since then has been their concert last summer at London's Royal Albert Hall when they played with the Philharmonic orchestra conducted by Malcolm Arnold. This has brought a variety of new titles for Jon varying from accusations of pretentiousness and incompetence to being the great unifier of pop and the classics.

"I was incredibly lucky that the first thing I ever wrote was done at the Albert Hall," says Jon. "It was like a giant gimmick, but it was really done from our point of view for the gas of doing it. It was incredibly indulgent sitting there in front of an orchestra in full flight.

"The only bad thing that's come out of it is that people have tried to push us into that bag as being a classical rock group. But we're not. We're a hard rock group of the most basic type."

The biggest thing that the Albert Hall concert did for Jon was to give him the self-confidence to go on writing major works of music. Despite his calm looks he's really quite shy; his composure is due to three years training as an actor. Although he puts little faith in horoscopes, he says he is a typical Gemini—split personality.

"I hold mental conversations with myself," he admits. "One side of me is the person who has become a lot more confident about what he wants to do. I used to be much too nice to other people. I wouldn't say boo to a goose. The other person is this incredibly lazy fellow who lies in bed and says 'five more minutes,' and the other half of me says 'no get up now.' I carry this mental conversation between the two halves into a lot of things."

But he is a sincere person, wise, thoughtful and runs a lot deeper than most people in the pop business. He got married last March to a pretty lady called Judy, and says it's the best step he ever took. At present they live in a £25-a-week two-floor flat in Parsons Green at the end of London's Kings Road, sharing it with Deep Purple's drummer. But Jon and Judy are moving out shortly into a rented house in Putney as Judy is expecting twins in June.

"She rang me up when I was in Switzerland the other week and started by saying 'oh I'm terribly sorry Jon, I do hope you won't be angry' and then said the doctor had told her she would probably have twins. I think it's great.

"Marriage is really great. I always thought it would be a woman's scene —the need to have security—but it's not, it reacts both ways. It's so easy in this business to get cynical and brought down. Before I was married I used to end up going to the Speakeasy because I was so lonely. I was always a bit cynical about marriage. I mean I was 27 before I got round to it and I thought I never would.

"The music business isn't really the sort of life that's easy to channel. We're likely to get a phone call to say next Wednesday we go to Berlin. It's not really great for Judy. But she's happy for me to be doing this."

Jon is really quite a versatile person. Besides writing and playing with the group, he's a qualified music teacher, having taken all eight grades of piano exams and LRAM teaching diploma. He's also a qualified actor, having done a three-year course at London's Central School of Speech and Drama after he left school in Leicester. Hence his slightly theatrical bearing and voice.

"I would dearly have loved to have gone on the stage. I think I must have been a reasonable actor to get through that course, but I don't think I was as good an actor as a musician. I'm lazy, but one thing I've always taken as a dictum is that whatever I do, I've got to do it well.

"I had great difficulty at drama school in losing my own personality and taking on the personality of the character. I could only play characters that were close to me and I don't think that would have been good enough."

Nevertheless he got a brilliant review in The Times for his part in the drama school production of "Suddenly Last Summer," staged in the West End. Jon played a Polish psychiatrist. On the strength of that he was offered a place in most of the country's leading repertory theatres, including Nottingham and Bristol, which Jon turned down.

"I was born in Leicester and spent 18 years there trying to get out. When I did get to London I loved it, and didn't want to move. I thought I could get into the theatre straight away."

He was wrong. Like most drama students who leave college imagining the world at their feet he gradually became more and more disillusioned. He started off with about £80 worth of savings. Very gradually it ran out and he began to starve.

"I ended up in a tiny dirty room in Archway, sitting looking at the wall and going out to find the odd friend to cadge a meal off."

Finally he was invited to a party and went along, purely because there'd be some food there. He met someone who knew he played piano, and got his first job—playing blues piano for £2 a night in the Bill Ashton Combo. Then he went to the Artwoods (Keef Hartley was drummer) and then formed Deep Purple with Ritchie Blackmore after they'd both failed auditions for another group.

That was two years ago, and since then the security of a successful group has done much for Jon. Primarily he's discovered he can write orchestral music.

The idea of doing a concert with a full orchestra occurred to him two years before it actually happened at the Albert Hall last summer. Consequently the Nice were first to do the idea at Plumpton festival—and everyone thought the two groups were arch enemies, one copying the other. In fact they're the greatest of friends.

Jon's epic concerto took him three months to write, and he still isn't quite sure HOW he wrote it. He wrote out the score for every instrument himself, and through June to August sat up all night writing.

"I was going mad playing gigs at night, rehearsing through the day and going back at 2 a.m. to write. I worked straight from my head rather than from the piano. Working from the piano you tend to think in terms of the piano only and limit yourself."

For the actual limitations of what each instrument was capable of, Jon had to consult a great tome called "Orchestration" by Forsythe. Since the concert, however, he's got to know Malcolm Arnold whose advice was to "throw the book out of the window, dear boy." The book pointed out that horns wouldn't go higher than A. Nonsense, said Malcolm Arnold, they'll go up to B or C—they won't like it, but they'll play it.

"The actual act of composing I've never been able to understand. Where does it come from? What makes you do it? It's the best thing that's ever happened to me. It's made me want to be a composer—after Deep Purple of course. I want to see Deep Purple through to its logical conclusion.

"Naturally enough, the group did feel I was neglecting them at the time—it reached a hiatus when I had to sit down and talk about it. But I've only just discovered I can write things for the orchestra. I still write for the group, but you can't possibly be that one-track minded and insulated into the group."

At present he's working on a suite —the Gemini suite—he's been commissioned to write by the BBC for group and orchestra. He's working on it differently, by writing in small chunks and then going back over it, whereas with his first major work he wrote the whole thing straight off before revising.

"If I'm going to be a composer I must learn to write during the day. At the moment light distracts me. I can't for the life of me remember the evening of the concert or the days before and after it. I can remember people standing cheering though."

Jon admires a great many composers and says his major influences have been from Vaughan Williams, Stravinsky and of course Malcolm Arnold.

"Malcolm Arnold has taught me that you can write 'serious' music with an element of enjoyment. Music must do something to you. If you've listened to a piece of music which has moved you almost to tears, you can go away feeling happy because you've been moved. That's what composing is all about.

"After the concert a lot of the soft music critics put me down for being over-derivative. But music all leads on from one person to another. If there hadn't been Beethoven there wouldn't have been Tchaikovsky, without whom there would have been no Stravinsky.

"There's the mysterious thing of germinating something in your head, but there's the conscious effort of thinking to dismiss other influences.

"Above all, though, we were not trying to break down the barrier between pop and classical music. If we'd done that we'd have been a disaster and the evening would have been a disaster."

Another idol of his is Frank Zappa, whom he met once about two years ago when a friend who was acting as Zappa's roadie brought him round. They talked for four hours, and Jon reckons he's "close on a genius."

"He keeps popping up the Underground and its followers and moving it on another step. And that's the only way the Underground will get anywhere, by people like him."

Jon's personal record collection consists mainly of classical things—about 200 albums. He's also got Simon and Garfunkel, Beatles, CTA, Flock, Zeppelin II ("of course—got to see what the opposition's doing"). But on the whole says he doesn't buy many rock albums, because he doesn't think a lot of them are very good.

The scene generally at the moment cheers him immensely, especially now that kids, instead of wanting his autograph, want to know more technical things about the music and the instruments. But the group still has to play "Hush"—it's expected of them, says Jon, although their music is way past that now.

Jon admits that his concerto has opened more doors to him than anything else.

"I'll be able to get film scores which will earn me money—good money—while I'm learning my craft. Valid orchestral music which is exciting and turns people on has got to mean something, and have a central core. And to write with that central core always in view, you've got to know what you're doing backwards."

The commercial aspect seems to worry Jon least. He has a realistic view of exactly how much it costs to live, especially with a family on the way, but he's not money mad. Each of the group receives £40 a week each (after tax) out of which they pay rent, food, clothes and so on.

For group records, the royalty money is split five ways, but for the record of the Concerto, Jon receives about 1s. a record—so is fervently hoping it might make a gold album in the States.

He's looking for a house to buy, but after several heart-breaking near misses when he was lined up, £11,000 mortgage in hand, and the deal fell through, he's a little wary. For the last few months he's been hiring a Vauxhall Viva car, which he admits is stupid. He's sworn to buy a car next month with some royalties.

On clothes, his biggest splash out was at Mr. Fish when he paid £80 for a suit. It's black and makes him look rather flash he says.

"This clothes thing is weird. I don't dress to please other people; I dress to please myself. My wife gets on at me and tells me I'm sloppy. I suppose she's right.

"I'm egotistical, but in a posing sort of way. I don't think I'm egotistical enough to be doing what I am. I think you should have something of an ego trip going to get onstage in the first place."

To have emerged unscathed from the public performance of his first-ever work is a feat. Jon has not become big-headed. He's still rather staggered that he and his concerto didn't bomb out. Above all, he's only 28, and one gets the feeling meeting him, that he's on the threshold of a great career.

Caroline Boucher

'I hold mental conversations with myself. One side is confident, the other is an incredibly lazy fellow'

JON LORD: I can't understand the act of composing. Where does it come from?

Next week: GINGER BAKER